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MONTHLY SERMON

BY

JOSEPH MAY

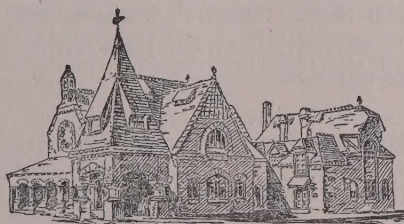
Pastor of the First Unitarian Church
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THE FALLING SEEDS



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH, CHESTNUT ABOVE 21st ST.

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THE Sermons of the Rev. Joseph May are to be published once a month for general distribution at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia.

The plan has been made possible by a guarantee fund already subscribed.

For its more complete success, however, further means are desired, and additional subscriptions to the fund are invited.

The Sermons will be distributed at the church on the Sunday nearest the fifteenth of each month.

In order further to extend their circulation it is proposed to offer the yearly series to subscribers by mail at half a dollar, including postage. Subscriptions may be sent to Mr. Dawes E. Furness, 2029 Sansom Street, Philadelphia. Special rates will be made to Post Office missions.

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THE FALLING SEEDS.

TEXT.—Matt. xiii, 3: "Behold, a sower went forth to sow."

The Parables of Jesus constitute the most remarkable extant example of the self-adaptation of a mind moving on the very highest plane of thought and feeling to the comprehension and sympathies of the uncultivated and the unthoughtful. The principle underlying the parable is one instinctively grasped by successful teachers of the people and of children in all ages and countries. It is the principle of illustration, the appeal to example. It suggests to you to fill your child's book with pictures, which leave their impression when abstract homilies would sound by like the wind. It fills the Catholic Churches most effectively with paintings and statues and illuminated windows. Illustrations are truth in the concrete; they require, on the part of the one to whom you appeal, only perception. An abstract truth demands the exercise of the reasoning powers, which may be still dormant or feeble. A good illustration *photographs* itself upon the mind, without the consciousness, almost, of the recipient. By-and-by it wakes to life as a force, though *when* it was received, *what* impressed the truth, one may totally have forgotten. In fact, one has actually *seen* the truth, *seen* the spiritual fact, *seen* the natural law, and whenever his faculties are strong enough (as Jesus used to hint) he recognizes what he saw.

Jesus early adopted this form of teaching; indeed, his thought always and everywhere clothed itself instinctively in the garb of illustration, metaphor and analogy. Nothing exhibits his wonderful power of

intellect more strikingly than his skill in taking the very highest spiritual truths, and by this medium making them comprehensible and effective with the ordinary mind. As works of intellectual art his parables are entirely unrivalled. The modern apologues, as those of Lessing, Krummacher and others, are tedious and feeble compared with these,—so simple, so easy, so spontaneous, yet instinct in every part with vital, nervous, trenchant or persuasive, converting or convicting force. Perennially new, they are inexhaustibly fertile, and fresh, suggestive and inspiring in the very highest degree.

As I read again this story of the sower, again I see him along the edge of his field, the slant morning sunlight warming the landscape, the birds wheeling and twittering, the chance passer-by calling salutation to the husbandman as he goads his droning steers and plods along the dusty highway. What field but has its jutting or half-clad rocks? Surely not one in Palestine! And what one but along the fence or wall has its fringe of thicket and bramble, where plow would not reach and which scythe only prunes down for the while? So the sower slowly sows his seed, treading steadily over the harrowed plain; and as his arm rhythmically sways, scattering its jets of grain, some fall by the wayside, where the ground is trodden, where no husbandry covers it with soil, but where the fearless birds settle and pick it up as they will. And some fall on these stony spots, and how shall we discover the thin soil in which they root? The rock that holds from settling deep the moisture of the spring, and the growing heat of the summer sun, a natural forcing-house, will clothe it with a hasty verdure, which the fervor of June will parch and kill. And that whose fate is in among the brambles; you see it by-and-by, sickly and pale, but the sturdy roots of the weeds were full of life and quick to sprout, and it lives only to exist, and forms no ear and scarce a tassel. But over the wide acres which now the sower patiently

bestrews, unevenly, indeed, yet richly, sometimes luxuriant, everywhere abundant, autumn shall see the waving spires of good grain, swaying their deepening gold above the true soil in which they rooted, bearing their hundred or sixty or thirty-fold harvest!

How peculiarly appropriate this was, as the opening one of the innumerable parables with which the conversations of Jesus went on to teem! It is a parable less profound than many of the others, as he himself intimates, dealing with no great spiritual fact like that of the leaven; less searching in its analysis of human character than that of the two debtors, or of the merciless servant, or the Pharisee and the publican. It is merely a picture of the actual facts of superficial human life and character, and the contrast of them with the richness—the richness in simplicity it may be—of hearts that love truth and lives that are genuine and earnest. But how graphically prophetic of his own personal experience! I should imagine it suggested by the incidents of the occasion; the great throng gathered along the lake-side, pressing him into the fisherman's boat,—eager, jostling, expectant. Yet he had already been preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, followed by just such crowds “through all their cities and villages.” And after all his efforts, all his expositions of the sweet thought which the sweet word—sweet, but so sadly perverted—the word “gospel” suggests; the thought of that happy time to come, when all sin and folly, and hatred and censoriousness and crime and suffering and sickness shall be purged away and God reign in his heavenly kingdom among human souls,—after all his pains, here they still were, the same gaping, dull, unappreciative herd; too narrow to accept, too simple to comprehend him;—the idly curious, the shallow well disposed, the worldly sensual;—only here and there a deep and tender heart. This was what it all came to! It was the loaves, after all, which most of them were after, or, at best, healing at his hands. So it was to be—and no one knew it was he. It may be

that it suddenly occurred to him to modify his style of address. Hitherto, among the Hebrews, moral instruction had been direct and literal to the extreme. There are no parables in the Mosaic law, no winning of men. It was all coercion, edict and interdict. Jesus saw the applicability of this *other* form of teaching; perhaps having always used it substantially, he suddenly thought of employing it more exclusively. It was natural he should begin thus, by drawing for his hearers a picture of themselves, and therein a picture of his own life, past and to come. The disciples were surprised at his change of style. "Wherefore art thou speaking to them in parables?" they asked. "Because, while you, having caught a gleam of the idea, may understand, they cannot yet." So he went on, thenceforth, from day to day, in every image, figure and metaphor, by pictures taken from every department of life, to lodge his truths in their imaginations that some future day might bring forth the harvest of comprehension. Who knows how many of the hundred and twenty who gathered in that upper chamber, the first Christian society, or of the three thousand which were added in one day to the church, were even in this day's crowd, and in those later times had but their eyes opened, and saw the meaning of the sower and the merchantman, the mustard-seed and the leaven, the tares and the wheat, the net, and the hidden treasure? But meantime Jesus had borne his burthen, and found where to lay his head!

"*Some seed felt by the wayside.*" We never accomplish anything without much apparently wasted effort. Undertake *anything* and you must do how much that afterwards seems only pains needlessly expended. If only all were ready; if all were charitable, or even just; if none were idlers, or shirks, or self-seekers, how many steps it would save, how many words and pages! And of all that you do for the good of others, how much seems fruitless in results. Perhaps, as Jesus looked back, this simile of the wasted seeds was the first germ of the parable. "Many seeds must fall,"

perhaps he thought, contenting himself in his weary work, "many seeds must fall that one may take root." Nature is prodigal. Upon the forest floor, in autumn, the dropping acorns keep up a perpetual tattoo,—how few shall bear their oaks! Through the fields a million seedlets float on the lazy August air; some the birds eat, some fall on streams, some on stones; of a thousand one roots and bears fruit. Off in the wilderness the loveliest, gaudiest hues adorn the sward, and sweetest notes re-echo in the impenetrable thickets, where rich-plumaged fowls hover, never to gladden with their beauty the only eye, save God's, that can delight in them.

"Full many a gem, of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

In the moral world it is just the same. God promises no outward results, in measure visibly tantamount to your efforts. He is no task-master, paying you "*quid pro quo*," so much for so much. "Thou shalt love him with *all* thy strength," and so put it all forth, not wastefully but ungrudgingly. You could not be sure you did love him if your efforts were always rewarded strictly. He has no ends for which He must needs *purchase* our assistance. It is for our good rather than His necessity that He chooses us as His instruments. But is it not a sweet thought that, although no one of us is indispensable to God's purpose, *every one* is indispensable to His affection? That although He will carry on all His great plans, and the efforts of any one of us scarcely make a ripple in the sweeping river of events, in which the greatest sinks and leaves so little sign, yet He can never rest satisfied till we have attuned our wills with His and proved our love by working, unrewarded, baffled, disappointed, it may be, in outward regard, but filled, rejoiced, crowned in the inner life?

Few men carry their ends in this life,—at least, their greatest ends. Scarce a cathedral in Europe stands finished to-day. The hypocrite can win the applause he delights in. It is rare that a true apostle enjoys the privilege permitted to the hero, whose generation of labor, begun as a solitary boy, ended with this nation's reorganization,—to live and look back on a task achieved. It is not even the *attainment* of the good end on which we should set our hearts, but only the good work whereby we hope to attain it. God will regenerate the world in His own good time. For us it is enough to labor and learn to wait. Waiting is the final proof of perfect consecration,—waiting while striving. Devotion to God's ends, while trusting to His power and His wisdom to accomplish in His own good season what seems to us imperative to-day. Effort, unparsimonious, although unsuccessful, is the pledge of the perfect evangelist.

And, after all, who sees as God sees? He who discovers one heart touched and softened by his words is rewarded infinitely, according to the measure of that heart's immortality! Truth seems to make but little headway! How sermons like the leaves of Vallambrosa rustle to the ground each Sabbath day! and truth, at least the greatest truth, in them all! Few men are so much tempted by self-distrust as faithful preachers. But it is an infidelity, after all! For men only *to do*, for God to *accomplish*. Therefore, stint not your work and doubt not your reward!

“Fling, fling the wayside seed!

Give it a firm God-speed.

What though more tempting plantage round it shoot?

Thy hope hath reached its goal

If one wayfaring soul

Pluck healing virtue with the wholesome fruit!”

The analyses of Jesus are not always critically exhaustive, I dare say. Doubtless there are other shades of character than those of this parable. But he is always

practically sufficient; to be more is pedantry. Here are four types of character, and exactly the four we are sure to meet. I say the *four*, for I will not be so misanthropic, or so false to him, as to leave out the last. And in what natural order they come.

First, *those by the way-side*; the passers-by, the loiterers, the lovers of ease and pleasure, the idle, listless and careless; the indifferent, accepting truth with the ear, but not valuing it, and so amenable to all the forces of sin, which always conquer those of Virtue off her guard.

Second, *those on stony ground*; the superficial; the well disposed, but feeble of will; impulsive, but not persistent; able to admire truth, but incapable of heroism; who excite your hopes and disappoint your expectations; who fail just as you begin to lean on them; who readily put hand to plow, but soon look back; who will follow, but must first bury some dead one; who will keep all the law, but look sadly as the Christ demands they sell their goods for the poor. Agrippa is the type of these; almost persuaded, never quite.

Third, *those among the thorns*; the lovers of money; our heated, over-worked men of business; many so-called "practical" men; men of experience; of affairs; whoever is unduly engrossed with aught that perishes. A great many good housekeepers, too busy to be charitable, reflective, or even neighborly. Many of the poor, too much tried by poverty to taste the sweets of piety. Felix and Martha are their types, the one finding no convenient season for truth (and hoping also for a bribe); the other cumbered with much serving, and losing the one thing.

But finally, fourth, *those on good ground*; natures deep, or, if not deep, at least faithful; aspiring, but modest; unaffected, earnest, devoted, persevering, ingenuous, active, the truly practical, the real servants and children of God.

Let us study this four-fold picture, and see what it yields.

I find, at the outset, an apostle's discouragements arranged in natural order. The first difficulty is always to *get hold* of men. As you approach society with truth, the first rebuff comes from the total indifference of a vast number to the whole subject. The world is full of pleasant people utterly careless of highest concerns; very well-mannered and well-behaved it may be; hospitable, kind, generous in a way—and utterly frivolous. Their morals are only instincts, their religion is words and forms. They go to church because it is the thing to go, and also *where* it is the thing to go. You can make no impression on such persons. Your shaft goes through and comes out the other side, but no blood follows. Nothing could be more perplexing! They are incapable of appreciating those distinctions in which truth resides. Truth knows not on which side to approach them. They are child-like in an *unfortunate* sense. One can fix their attention only as he does that of children, intermittently and briefly each time. They hear the word, but understand it not. That is, they cannot estimate its importance, for whoso understands, values. How such swarm in our cities! Perhaps it is not harsh to say that levity, indifference, drifting disregard of the *most* important things, be they religious, moral, political or social, characterizes the majority of men. Here is a man who "takes no interest" in politics; others "see nothing" in the great moral questions of the day. What countless thousands repeat creeds and sustain churches with never an inquiry into the truth or fallacy of the doctrines they hear and practically uphold! There is much of the way-side spirit in us all,—a listless, dazy sentiment, such as the summer morning and the sleeping country bring over you as you stroll along, and find it impossible to think. Wisdom uttereth her voice in the streets, but we are all *passers-by*. We neglect a thousand thoughts where we take in one for culture and the harvest. How many, as they come to us, we feel to be precious, but we have not so ordered our

minds as to bestow them. Like the waifs of fact or fancy in the newspapers, we smile on them, but do not fix them in the book of memory. Of all prayers that I have heard none ever struck me more than a favorite supplication of an eloquent preacher of our body, "*Renew in us, Father, our best thoughts!*" That is only to renew the approaches of His infinite, healing presence. What a precious thing is character, but how few of us systematically cultivate it! What a world of opportunities for doing good surround us, but how few diligently try to improve them! How few, in short, take moral life thriftily, industriously, perseveringly.

Jesus's second class are likewise numerous and noticeable,—the thin-soiled, *i. e.*, the superficial, *thin-souled*, I might have said. Those on the stony ground are they who are able to see truth and to love it; that is, persons of good native impulses and good principles, but who lack the persistency which achieves success in life and in character. We are always finding those who, when a good idea is suggested, a good cause is to be vindicated, through natural goodness of heart at once assent and promise their support. We are all so more or less. Truth is beautiful and fitting, we cannot help but admire her. When Garrison first preached anti-slavery in this country not a few prominent men at once hailed and endorsed him, North and even South. But truth wants more than admiration; she demands love, and love is to be proved by works. "When persecution arises because of her word" ("*when*," says Jesus, not "*if*," implying that it almost always does arise), then we are tested, not in our sentiments, but in our wills. There is where real character resides, and there is where we are apt to be deficient. We begin to count the cost. Those spontaneous Abolitionists presently did so, and the great reformer was left alone. Good resolutions pave the Infernum, according to the adage. They represent what we see, but have not the will and persistency to accomplish. How few, as I said before, have the *force* really to

amend character. What scores know they eat too much, or drink too much, or idle too much, or work too much, and go about with consciences always just ruffled, never smoothed to peace by vigorous self-assertion. The fact is that this is an age and ours is a country of superficiality. Everything goes fast. The opportunities of education are wide-spread, but the invitations to action are innumerable. The newspaper is the emblem of our culture. The tendency of the time is decidedly moral,—or moralizing. We are all interested, to a degree, in the right and the well. But we lack concentration and thoroughness. Our perceptive faculties are sharpened; we have little time for self-discipline. The rock is beneath, the sun is warm above; out of the thin soil of our hearts, constantly bedewed with the steaming thought of the age, perpetual crops of short-lived purposes shoot up and droop and die!

My friends, especially my young friends, here are two things to be said; one is a matter of morals, the other of practical wisdom. The last is this,—reflect that you cannot do everything; the greatly useful are those who concentrate their strength, giving it to a few aims. Therefore, converge your forces on such as befit you, and on that line fight your campaign, though it takes forever! For the former thought is this,—that a good purpose once seen is an obligation imposed. A good resolution is a promise made to God. From what you have seen if you draw back, you are leaving the very presence of the All-Holy. God's vehicle of revelation to the soul is truth,—beware lest you refuse it. To *give up* is infidelity to Him. Be not satisfied with perception; ask your hearts if you have *done* anything for God. Is his truth the stronger in the world for your service to it? Are you wiser or better for all the truth you have had? Are you *growing*? Is a fair wealth of green waving over your field, or only scattered tufts, as ephemeral as they are sporadic? There is a Latin motto about reading—

"not many things but much." It applies to life. The very thing God demands of us is to make of perceptions character; of truth seen facts realized; in short, to exchange superficiality for depth. The very thing He puts us into the world for is to till our soil, plowing deep, digging out the obstinate rocks of indolence, levity, prejudice and worldliness. It is not enough to *see* truth. He does that for us, giving us both the eyes to see and the truth to be seen. Our life-business is to take it in, working our soil beneath his sun, till it brings forth a harvest fit for his reaping.

Jesus's third class is the worldlings, but I have no time to speak of them, and we can well pass them by,—one is preaching to them all the while. There are few of us that do not come into this category! But how sad it is that we should turn the fair field which God made for His own harvest into a thicket of thorns, and then, under their stifling shadow, sicken and die in the spiritual life! "The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches!" The poor as well as the rich, then—the woman as well as the man! We are almost all under the condemnation that we appropriate the world as the store-house of our own gratification, instead of using it as the theatre of His service. By ambition, as by anxiety; by laboriousness, as by dissipation; by love of art; through quest of health; in a thousand subtle ways; we choke the seed which the Eternal Husbandman is sowing, sowing in our hearts.

We come to the fourth class. Thank God for his faithful ones; and for the hope that He will one day lead us all among them! What a rich treasure, a deep character, a fruitful life! How instinctively we honor those who, in spheres infinitely various, fulfil in fair measure—sixty, if not a hundred, thirty, if not sixty fold—the hope of God in us! Jesus is never unreasonable, so to speak. After all, though his standard is so high, his condescension as a moralist is extreme. You shall have a city to rule, for your *one* talent, if you will only make one, two. A thirty-fold harvest yet

proves your heart good soil. Who but loves to see in society those who live unselfishly to serve good aims; who rise above sensuality and fashion and frivolity; who look about for good deeds to do, whether humble or important; whose hands are ever busy at home and abroad; whose hearts are ever tender to the *next* appeal; who listen willingly and respond surely; who take hold, not egotistically, not because they love to manage, refusing machination, fearless of criticism, rebuffs and ingratitude, unwearied and self-forgetful, doing such work as they can do, quietly, simply, unpretentiously, for each good cause. It is a sweet sight, too, to see one unselfishly thoughtful of self-culture, putting a check on character here, giving it a spur there; trampling on prejudices, resisting faults; overcoming indolence; tilling the possibly stony, possibly thorn-infested soil which God has been pleased to give one for one's heritage.

After all, the world is full of good people, too! There is no Sodom without its Lot. When the flood comes faithful Noah must always be provided for, for he is worthy. They have their reward, too. Shall God give to the Pharisee and not to the Publican? There is a delicious free-masonry among such souls. What a warm, cheerful atmosphere they breathe together! Oh! virtue *does* pay, after all! Those poor, persecuted reformers of our country, who for thirty years bore the brunt of a battle of which afterward so many were glad to share the laurels, had precious consolations all the while in the close sympathy, the mutual support into which persecution threw them. As I think of the upper chamber where that last supper was eaten, and the broken bread and the poured wine were the symbols of the coming sacrifice; as I imagine those solitary wanderings by the Lake, and many an evening talk beneath the soft sky of Galilee, with the quiet hymn at parting, there always rises before my mind the vision of a dear delight which was worth all the trials, all the obloquy and the coming

martyrdoms of the little band ! What is grander than virtue in misfortune ? I think no more gracious word was ever spoken,—where the delicacy of the gentleman mingles with the self-abandonment of the Apostle,—than that of Paul the prisoner to Agrippa the king : “ I would to God that not only thou, but also all who hear me this day were both almost and altogether such as I am,—except these bonds ! ”

Oh ! God does not desert His saints ! It is a trifle to go to prison or to stake *after* the heart is once given to Him ! How the martyrs could rejoice in flames ! “ Why dost thou so ? ” says the spectator,—some passer-by, perhaps,—to the victim plunging his right hand into the cruel flame till it melts and burns. He had recanted once and that hand signed the lie. Now, “ the member shall first suffer,” he says, “ which was the instrument of my sin.”

God has His great ones ; but the hundred-fold crop grows just as richly in humble fields. God’s eye is over the hamlet as faithfully as over the court. All He will have is deep-tilled soil, bearing such harvest as He shall sow for, and whence, at autumn, you and I come home, bringing our ripe sheaves with us !

